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VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF ANCIENT MODELS IN THE USEFUL ARTS.

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The great importance of ancient models for modern Art-Industry can be no longer disputed, the facts which the last Exhibitions made evident having sufficiently proved it. But there are eyes that do not see, and ears that do not hear, and sometimes we meet with the opinion, strange and incomprehensible in our day, that the old creations of the Useful Arts are worthless for us, and altogether useless for modern Art-Industry. It is true that art-collections are being established, and the necessity of them for the improvement and elevation of Taste is generally acknowledged; but these museums are intended for modern specimens and works of Art-Industry of the present time.

It will be easy to demonstrate the absurdity of such an opinion, which can only be harboured by those who are ignorant of the link between the old and the new, and who fail to appreciate the intrinsic worth of ancient master-pieces. For the best productions in the realm of taste amongst modern nations are French and English; but their very best are suggested by the study and imitation of old specimens. Others, satisfied with following their lead by imitating the imitators, only produce second-hand copies, instead of referring directly to the originals.

Although the inference derived from hence might appear convincing enough, we wish to make the value and importance of works of art, and their usefulness as models for modern reproduction, the object of our study.

It may be considered as an acknowledged fact that, until the beginning of modern revival of Art-Industry, or rather the effect thereby experienced, nothing commendable has been produced. The French works of art which alone enjoyed until then an immense though vague reputation were stared at unconsciously, and blindly accepted without being examined. But today all those productions of French Industry are estimated at their proper value. However superior they may be to the imitations

made from them, they are nevertheless deficient as creations of true art.

Two principal faults may be pointed out which adhered till then, and indeed do so still, to the great mass of all modern creations of Art-Industry, especially to the French works which must be considered as types and models of their kind; viz., complete neglect of the artistic form, and deficiency in color, limited to the employment of grey and other cognate tints. Besides, each industrial department had its particular defect; furniture, e. g., was of faulty and irrational construction; in glass manufacture the properties and refractive qualities of the material were mistaken and neglected; precious metals, especially gold, suffered under an injudicious treatment and disregard of their eminently plastic qualities, and their alliance with colored enamel. The art-workman having for years, nay for two centuries, pursued a wrong path, the taste for simple beauty and purity of form, the sense of true harmony of color, had necessarily been destroyed in the artist as well as in the public. The latter following, as a mass, merely the dictates of fashion, have gradually become disused to the beautiful; and having for years past thrown away as rubbish what inheritance they once possessed from their predecessors, are now naturally devoid of all understanding in this respect. They demand novelty, not beauty; satisfied with the substitution of some odd fancy or idea, some freak of nature, for severity of form, they do not know that instead of a work of art they have in hand some mere childish toy.

It is evident that this unsound taste of the public can only be improved by the view and appreciation of good models. But are the most recent creations, or the more ancient ones which already served as models for modern works capable of producing such results?

It cannot be denied that great benefit has already

been derived from those new endeavours for a revival in art, much being produced which in its turn may be set up as model and example. But, without considering that these creations are the results of taste derived from the original and genuine one, only few of them may be termed entirely faultless and unincumbered in any way with the defects of the present or other opposite ones. Too frequently, in endeavouring to avoid Scylla, they have fallen into Charybdis. Decorations, e. g., in order to avoid the grey tints have often been made too gorgeous in color. For carpet-patterns and table-covers stiff geometrical ornament has been adopted by way of reaction from immoderate naturalism.

In imitation of old majolicas and works akin to them, quite a new branch of the Ceramic Art has arisen, which, and it is with great pleasure we acknowledge this, has produced much that is highly interesting and satisfactory. But the best works are those which are copied as strictly and faithfully as possible from ancient models, and even in them we often miss the congenial repose and harmony of color of the original, and the judicious mode of execution which keeps the right medium between over-refinement and coarseness or neglect. Original creations, attempted in this branch of art, are generally hard in form, outline, or color, and more or less incongruous as to invention, and the limits imposed by the material. Anyhow, it is not easy to find productions of this kind which might be conscientiously recommended as faultless models.

The same may be said of other branches of modern Art-Industry. The reintroduction of old Venetian glass-manufacture, the imitation of those charming and light glasses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of Murano, by Salviati and his companions, is certainly a very promising fact; still it cannot escape an experienced eye, comparing the old with the new glasses, that the former greatly surpass the latter in lightness, elegance and beauty of form. And nothing is more natural than this. These glasses are free creations of an original artistic genius, of a skilful masterhand, and an experienced, unerring eye, not work made to pattern. But such nicety of execution, such true understanding of beauty of form, are the results of long experience and culture to which the art-workman of the present day is still a stranger. Salviati's new and original creations in the old style are mostly capricious in form, and sometimes regardless of beauty. These modern Venetian glasses, however willing we may be to acknowledge their relative merit, cannot therefore in any way become a substitute for their ancient models.

If, however, we study attentively the ancient works of art, we shall hardly be at a loss whenever characteristic examples are wanted. Perhaps no branch of modern Art-Industry has been reduced to a more unsatisfactory state, or less benefited by recent reforms than jewellery. We should be entirely at fault, were we required to fill this section of a museum for Art and Industry with European productions of the last few years. What clumsy or singular vessels, what absurd table-services

and centre-pieces, what capricious varieties of bijoux, poor and insignificant of invention, should we not have to classify! What contrast with the works of Antiquity, the Middle-Ages, Renaissance, and Eastern Art! Where can we find more charming jewellery, more strictly conventional, and graceful in design, and more exquisite in workmanship than the marvellous creations of the goldsmith's art of Classical Antiquity? For diadems, hair-pins, necklaces, brooches, rings, and bracelets, for everything in fact do we find noble specimens in which the precious material is made to produce the most beautiful effect. Mediæval metal-work also, for the service of the Church, the adornment of the altar, the sacred vessels, etc., exhibits models equally remarkable for rich elaborate workmanship, and ever-varying forms of noble dignity and unblemished beauty. Then the goblets and monster drinking-cups of late Gothic Art, with their bosses without, and the sparkling glitter within; after these the elegantly designed and richly moulded cups of the Renaissance period, wrought with exquisitely chased and embossed ornament and figures. These all display great purity of taste and true understanding of form, proportion and outline, accomplishments which have been destroyed by our vulgar homage to naturalism, and love for solid masses of brilliant silver. To those advantages we may add the employment of translucent and opaque enamel, giving to the plastic form the charm and enhancement of color. How very seldom, if at all, do we find works of the modern goldsmith which might bear comparison with the charming and elaborately wrought *chefs-d'œuvre* of the sixteenth and early part of the seventeenth centuries, productions which exhibit the most delicate treatment of gold, combined with the effect of enamel, engraved and cut crystal, pearls, precious and semi-precious stones, in most successful and perfect works of art. If there are recent productions of this sort they have been created by way of imitation of those works, which are to-day the gems of our art-collections.

Nor is it more difficult to find models for the art-workman in more common metals, especially iron. Iron, as material for works of art, has until lately been unjustly neglected in the nineteenth century. Cast-iron work may have much contributed to this, an elegant and judicious treatment of which, satisfying the artistic taste, having but lately been successfully attempted. It has only been valued for its technical properties, and in an artistic point of view has been replaced by brass or other amalgamats more brilliant on their exterior surface. But the numerous metal works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, those unsurpassed and flourishing periods of art, show to what degree this material will lend itself to a superior, artistic employment, at once rich and manifold, appropriate and rational in its application. We may begin with the most simple objects and nevertheless find them instructive, and exemplary of their kind. If we consider, e. g., door-hinges, locks, bolts etc. welded and fashioned under the hammer, extending and interlacing each other as if growing and unfolding themselves naturally into leaf and flower, elegantly but

solidly stretched over the surface of the door; if we see how these leaves and flowers gain life and spirit by embossed, flowing scroll-work, by the bold but graceful play of forms and lines, we cannot but confess that everything looks as if it could not possibly be otherwise, as if it were the work of nature rather than of man. The same character is seen in embossed ornamental locks, in keys with artfully worked handles, and at a later period in etched box-mounts, and other plates with delicate arabesque-work, in wrought-iron grilles, and the large, freely worked flowers, serving as terminals. If, in glancing at the craft of the armorer of the period, we cast a look on the etched, chased and damascened armors, the gilt and inlaid blades, the sword-hilts worked in steel and iron, there will arise before the experienced eye of the connoisseur a whole world of rich and admirable works with which we have at present absolutely nothing to compare, although the necessity for an artistic treatment of wrought-iron has actually gained ground and achieved practical results in England and France.

We may pass now to another branch of art, i. e., productions in wood. Many must have admired at the last Paris Exhibition the Italian wood-carvings, their elegant framework, panelling, compartments with charmingly executed relief-work, and lastly the chests with their exuberant richness of ornamentation, inlaid ivory and engraving. All these, as well as many other Italian works which adhered strictly to the old examples of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, have borrowed their charm and excellence from these specimens of a happier period of Art in Italy, which in every respect may be looked up to as models and genuine master-pieces, advantages which however do not belong to Italian productions alone but also to other works of the same time.

By the Italians of our days we are taught infallibly the value of ancient models by way of contrast, for where they do not resort to them, as, e. g., in the magnificent fabrics for ecclesiastical use, their productions appear as if devoid of all artistic taste and understanding. Their gold-diapered church-vestments exhibited at Paris were coarse and common, without design and harmony of color. Still not less beautiful specimens of

this kind, and also of Italian workmanship, are preserved from the early time of the Middle-Ages until the sixteenth century. The old silk tissues of Lucca, the weavings in gold and velvet of Genoa and Venice, are everything that can be desired for such surface decoration. If we add to these the brocades of Lyons, Tours and Flanders, the tissues of old Saracen origin, together with all the Indian, Persian, old and new Eastern fabrics, which as a traditional or inherited decorative art, we may and must rank amongst the old models, we have to dispose of an abundance of ornamental motives, sufficient for every requirement either of study or practical use.

Reviewing the past, its resources at our disposal are inexhaustible. Perhaps we may meet with the objection, that if we lay under contribution, without reserve, both past and foreign Art, we shall finish by being mere eclectics, or put together things which from their very nature must ever be incongruous. But the case is simply this: No period in art, no nation has ever cultivated all the branches of Art and Industry simultaneously; they often appear even independant of each other; e. g., Mediæval surface decoration, while of Mauresque origin, has no sort of relation with contemporary Gothic Art either in Architecture or in the Useful Arts. Pottery, which the Greeks brought to perfection, was in its turn hardly and but imperfectly cultivated during the Middle-Ages. We must first enquire after material and purpose, and then look about us where an object, in accordance with its nature, was brought to perfection in order to make it our model. The difference we may remark in different specimens is neither that of style, nor period, but caused by the nature of the object. Objects of different kinds in harmony with themselves, will not disagree with one another. High above them stand the unchangeable laws of Uniformity and Conformity. Thus we shall cease to trouble ourselves about the choice of *some* style and at last succeed in actually possessing a style of our own, i. e., the true and artistic expression of form, most appropriate to the object. This is the right and genuine naturalism, the artistic form natural and proper to the work.